

PILOT PROJECT BENEFITS YOUTH IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW



FRIENDS AND ROLE MODELS



[1] Adam van Aggelen (left) and Michael McLean.
[2] Mike Blackburn.

Just like any "big brothers" volunteering with their "little brothers" to hockey games, movies, the gym and to shoot pool.

They act as friends and provide positive support their little brothers might not find elsewhere – and might need more than the average teen. Van Aggelen, McLean and their little brothers are part of Ototema II, a pilot program of BBS for youth who are, or have been, in conflict with the law. The program was launched in 2006 after BBS, Manitoba Justice staff and the community

identified the need for such a resource, says program coordinator Mike Blackburn.

"There are a lot of programs for kids who are in custody, and there are also programs for kids who are on probation in the community that focus on issues surrounding their offences," says Blackburn. He adds, "there really wasn't any kind of mentorship program and a lot of the kids don't have positive role models."

Although volunteers don't counsel their little brothers and sisters, and aren't expected to solve or get involved with the youths' legal issues, the program has the potential to play a powerful preventative role.

"If you're willing to listen, be empathetic and be understanding – even if it just gives [the youth] the opportunity to vent, it's better than them going out and stealing a car, or going out and getting drunk," says Blackburn.

Ototema II received a grant from The Winnipeg Foundation last year, and is supported by Manitoba Justice and the federal Youth Justice Renewal Fund. Youth who take part are referred by their probation officers; BBS works closely with justice staff and establishes the one-on-one matches after volunteers have been screened and trained.

"These are kids who have had a tough road in their short lives, but they're really resilient," says Blackburn. "A lot of them have gone through things I couldn't imagine going through. They're trying to make it. They're good kids."

Taking its name from the Cree word meaning "my friend," Ototema offers participating youth an opportunity to leave behind their difficult home and social lives, if only for a few hours a week. "I think, at a minimum, [the volunteers'] involvement in this program is giving [the youth] a break from

their daily stressors. This is just an opportunity for [youth] to get out and forget about their problems and what they have going on for a few hours a week and enjoy themselves," says Blackburn.

The volunteer mentors are also enjoying themselves. "I can kind of feel like a kid again," says McLean. "We'll go out and play pool and I don't have to worry about school or work or anything like that. It's fun for me, too."

Van Aggelen agrees, adding that the program has helped him broaden his understanding of issues facing youth.

"When I was 13 years old I was trading hockey cards," says van Aggelen. "These guys are seeing drugs run in front of them. It's a completely different world. It's good perspective on life and the world right now for these kids."

McLean and van Aggelen are both students in a criminal justice program at Red River College. Taking part in Ototema has helped them clarify their career goals.

"When I first started [criminal justice studies], I was solely wanting to be a police officer," says McLean. "But now I'm leaning more towards working with kids like my little brother as a career."

Van Aggelen says, thanks to his experiences with Ototema, he plans to go into youth corrections. But for both mentors, participation in the program is more than just career preparation.

"I had a good foundation of family and support from the community," says van Aggelen. "I thought, there's no point just sitting there and letting it go to waste. Pass it on to someone else who is less fortunate."

For more information on Ototema II, or to become a volunteer, visit www.bigwinnipeg.com

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